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ABSTRACT

Many stay-in-school programs support some individuals but do not serve the larger school population. This digest describes a project that would integrate an array of interventions for "at-risk" youth with planned organizational and curricular re-structuring activities. The project consists of 8 groups of 55 to 60 students. While the underlying goal was to reduce the dropout rate, the overall objective was to provide more personalized support for all students. The program established four goals, which included making at-risk students feel like they belong to the school community and helping such students develop the skills necessary to increase their sense of social responsibility. Thirteen activities were used to reach these goals, such as establishing support programs in the areas of peer tutoring, peer counseling, and peer mentorship and establishing school-community service projects. The program is unique in that it reaches across grades and provides services to students without segregating at-risk students. It also encompasses all aspects of the curriculum and seeks to draw together school and community resources on behalf of students. Although this program is relatively new, students, parents, and teachers have given it favorable reviews. (RJM)

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Project P.O.D.S.: Providing Opportunities for Developing Success. ERIC Digest.

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by Ron Roberge

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

ERIC DIGEST

1995 EDO-CG-95-56

Project P.O.D.S.
Providing Opportunities for Developing Success

Ron Roberge

Overview

In 1990, as part of a national stay-in-school campaign, the district researched its school dropout rate and confirmed that the figures were consistent with the provincial and national averages: 30-35% of students starting grade 10 did not finish high school (Alexander & McEwin, 1989; Armstrong, 1988). A broad-based task force confirmed that a comprehensive intervention must be developed to reduce the high dropout levels. The Director of Special Education and a Stay-in-School Program Developer proposed a project that would integrate an array of interventions for "at-risk" youth with planned organizational and curricular re-structuring activities at two junior secondary and two elementary schools. The project was called "Providing Opportunities for Developing Success" or PODS.

The project consists of eight "PODS," or groups of fifty-five to sixty students, (two at each participating school) with two teachers assigned to each POD. While the underlying goal was to reduce the dropout rate, the overall objective was to provide more personalized support for all students through programs described in the literature as the "best practices" for responding to students at risk of dropping out (Conrath, 1988; Slavin, 1988). In this way, it was anticipated that meaningful and successful activities would become permanent features of the schools, and would be available to all students in the system.

Program Goals

The main objectives and supporting activities of PODS are as follows:

1. To develop among at-risk students a sense of belonging, identification, and membership within the school community.

2. To develop within at-risk students the ability to demonstrate mastery in endeavors relevant and suitable to their individual needs.

3. To develop with at-risk students the skills necessary to increase their sense of social responsibility.

4. To develop, through a coordinated and planned series of activities, the ability for at-risk students to achieve independence and a higher internal locus of control.

The above objectives constitute key indicators of success for students that are at risk of dropping out of school.

To achieve these objectives, the project was committed to implementing 13 activities, briefly described as follows:

1. Establishing support programs for at-risk youth in the areas of peer tutoring, peer counseling, and peer mentorship.

2. Establishing a conflict resolution and mediation program for at-risk youth.

3. Establishing mechanisms which facilitate access to school governance for at-risk youth in school-home partnerships.

4. Establishing school organizations which are more personalized and learner focused to the social, academic, and personal needs of at-risk youth and their families.

5. Establishing a program which enables at-risk youth to acquire and demonstrate an advanced skill level in non-traditional academic or vocational pursuits.

6. Establishing a formalized process for demonstrating significant skill acquisitions within the school and community.

7. Establishing a program of leadership training for at-risk youth.

8. Establishing mentorship programs aimed at developing career awareness and which enhance the relevance of education.

9. Establishing school and community partnerships in support of at-risk youth.

10. Establishing multi-age peer support networks across grade and school organizations (secondary-elementary).

11. Establishing a support network for parents of at-risk youth.

12. Establishing a series of parent education seminars focusing on the social, emotional, and educational needs of adolescents.

13. Establishing a program of school-community service projects.

Discussion

The unique feature of the PODS project is its comprehensive nature. It is comprehensive across grades, including elementary, intermediate, and secondary schools. It provides services to students within the schools without segregating at-risk students. It encompasses all aspects of the curriculum and seeks to draw together school and community resources on behalf of students. This approach stands in contrast to the majority of dropout interventions which offer special services for the at-risk students, often as alternate programs, and which target students only at the intermediate or secondary level.

Many existing programs provide valuable support for the individuals involved, but they are inadequate in terms of serving the larger school population. Furthermore, such services are often "too little too late" to curb the momentum toward dropping out which often begins in early childhood. For these reasons, it should not be surprising that research results on these programs have failed to produce encouraging overall results. In contrast to earlier methods, the PODS project adopted a comprehensive approach. A wide range of services that are needed by at-risk youth have been identified and blended together in regular integrated school settings. The PODS project reflects the belief in supporting diversity through unity. It embodies the belief that learning takes place within social relationships and a caring environment. Kids learn best in an environment that instills and promotes self-esteem and which provides more personal and caring contact with fewer teachers.

Conclusion

Although PODS is relatively new, there is ample evidence that it is working: from independent evaluations (Neufeld, 1994), internal evaluation reports (Doerksen & Richardson, 1994; PODS Steering Committee, 1994), and documentation in teacher logs. Teachers reported that PODS participants in the peer tutoring program "are some of the best tutors: the most compassionate and most dependable." Students reported that involvement in PODS had a positive effect on self-esteem and social skills, in the words of one student "I learned people skills, how to communicate better and how to work with others." One of the PODS participants went on to become Prime Minister of the student body. A parent survey indicated that 99% of the parents were in favor of the PODS program and 95% of them attributed the success of the program to its comprehensive nature. All 13 activities in the program received similar support. Thus, it is not possible to identify any single activity to account for the success. More likely, the success of the PODS Project lies in its comprehensiveness and its emphasis on personal interaction. In the words of one teacher, "I am strongly supportive of the program. As a teacher, I particularly like the flexibility and the opportunity it gives me to become personally involved with the students."

One further factor contributing to the success of PODS is that it is driven by a dedicated and enthusiastic staff. The staff display a wholesome balance between confidence in the project, optimism for its future, and, on the other hand, a constructive but critical wariness. The ongoing success of PODS is certainly dependent on a spirited and dedicated team of teachers. With the continued commitment of teachers and administrative support PODS will continue to produce positive results.

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